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## THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF JESUS

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PROFESSOR ALFRED WILLIAMS ANTHONY, D.D.  
Bates College, Lewiston, Me.

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The term "religion" embraces two distinct, yet closely related, concepts. One pertains to the mind, has to do with opinions, takes shape in conviction and faith, and, when wrought out into a clearly articulated system of belief, fortified by adequate rational considerations, is termed theology. The other pertains to concrete, external acts, involves modes of action, rules of procedure, or principles of conduct.

Jesus did not teach theology in the domain of faith, nor ethics as a code of conduct in the domain of practice. It may seem superfluous to state that he was pre-eminently religious and by both practice and precept imparted religious principles and incentives, but as a teacher we must plainly recognize, and frankly confess, that he taught neither theology nor ethics, though giving data for both.

The data of the ethics of Jesus may be found in (1) what he did—his example taken as precedent; (2) what he sententiously said as applied to conduct—his "wisdom" utterances as precepts and exhortations; and (3) what appear as the principles of his life, as evinced in his deeds, in his sententious sayings, and in his more formal and protracted teachings, whether parables or discourses. To discover the principles we must take a wider view than a single act, and must listen to more than one isolated oriental utterance, for neither an act nor a saying can be rightly understood by itself; both must be viewed in relation to circumstances and as a part of the whole life.

The principles of Jesus are involved in his acts, but may not at any moment be clearly and fully expressed in any one, single act. The concrete often expresses more than one mode of action, or one harmonious principle. It must be related with other similar and dissimilar acts within the same plane before it can be determined whether the single act represents the generic principle or not. In other words no single act of Jesus can be taken as a type of what he

wishes done. What he then did may be the thing and the only thing which was right to do at the given time, under the then existing circumstances, but not the thing which should be done at another time under other circumstances. His deeds may be taken as precedents, only when we are sure that the circumstances are identical in which we would repeat what he did. To walk "in his steps" is folly, when we understand it to mean simply to place our feet exactly where he has placed his. The Holy Land retains no communicable grace because he walked on it. To go to Palestine, to traverse the hills and vales which he hallowed with his presence, would yield no virtue to us. Chicago, San Francisco, New York, and Boston require our feet; we must follow him in America, not in Syria. In our circumstances we are obliged to do many things which he never did, for which we can discover, in looking at the external act, no precedent. He never stood before a "mule," or loom, in a cotton or woollen mill; he never poured hot iron into molds at the glaring mouth of a foundry furnace; he never "stoked" fires in the depths of an ocean liner; he never held the control-handle on the front platform of an electric car, nor collected fares on a suburban line in rush hours; he never executed orders on 'Change, nor dealt in stocks and bonds, wheat, hides, or lumber. He never administered the affairs of a Harvard University, nor served on a local school board. Writing articles for the *Biblical World* was unknown to him or setting forth ethical rules in any written, systematized form.

Two things we must conclude respecting the ethics of Jesus, as embodied in his acts: (1) That his example entirely fails at innumerable points, because we must do innumerable deeds which he never did; (2) That his example fails at many other points, not as numerous, but almost innumerable, because he did many things which we cannot, or should not, do today. We cannot walk on the water, multiply loaves and fishes, heal the sick and crippled, and raise the dead to life. We would not for a moment think of imitating him in calling disciples about us, inviting our fellow-men to come unto us for soul-rest and for forgiveness of sins.

Yet the example of Jesus, seen as a concrete expression of the abstract, may reveal to us his ethical principles. While we cannot heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, and give sight to the blind, as he

wrought cures, we can relieve distress, we can set remedial agencies in operation, we can feel pity and compassion, and can ourselves minister, even as he himself ministered, in complete forgetfulness of ourselves and in loving sympathy with the unfortunate, however wretched and loathsome. We may not sit at the same banqueting boards at which he reclined, yet we may, without lowering our ideals or tarnishing our virtues, associate with the corrupt officials, the impure profligates, and the wretched and ruined characters of our day, as did he in his day, and, by the bonds of human fellowship and hearty consecration to holy living, help lift them to our plane of life. We may not be called upon to drink the same cup that he drank, nor to be baptized with the same baptism with which he was baptized, but we must practice self-denial; on every hand is the requirement to forget self and live, or die, for others. Parents both live and die for their children, sacrificing self oftentimes as completely by living as by dying. Patriots suffer vicariously for their country. Men count not life itself dear, sometimes in most humble circumstances, often unnoticed and unknown, yet in the spirit of Christ, after the example of Christ, meeting each his trial in his Garden of Gethsemane and coming each to his Calvary, thereby adjusting a modern life to the ethical model of Jesus. The ethical conformity is frequently the closest when the outward expression varies most widely from the acts of Jesus.

The principles of Jesus are involved but not always fully stated in his brief, sententious sayings. The use of the proverb, or the maxim, in the time of Jesus was far more common than with us. One distinct kind of Hebrew literature, of which the Book of "Proverbs" is a notable example, consisted almost wholly of such compact epigrammatic utterances, and is now known as "Wisdom Literature." Jesus made use of current wisdom sayings and also coined his own. When applicable to conduct, these often express ethical rules, or principles.

Another name for these direct utterances respecting conduct, early employed in the history of Christianity and long misunderstood, is "precepts." Monasticism at its beginning divided the teachings of Jesus into two classes, a lower class, known as "precepts," addressed to the mass of Christian disciples, who constitute the great

lay element of the church, and a higher class, designated as the "counsels," which were deemed applicable to the clergy alone, who, out of secular relations, removed from worldly contaminations, sought a special degree of holiness and sanctity in a life which was deemed, by reason of its separation from the world, truly and exclusively spiritual.

Such a division of disciples into two distinct classes does not seem warranted by the words of Jesus, although he refers in many varying terms to two classes of men, but these are disciples and non-disciples, not two grades of disciples. Those who are not with him are against him; there are men who accept him and men who reject him; there are "sheep" and there are "goats." His ethical precepts and principles are for all men; and distinctions arise only as men heed these teachings, or ignore and disobey them.

The ethical precepts of Jesus, though applicable to all men, yet, as in the case of his acts, have relations and restrictions arising from circumstances. Of wider application than his acts, the precepts of Jesus have currency, however, only in circumstances closely similar to those under which they were originally spoken, herein unlike principles which are everywhere and at all times in force. "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted" and all expressions inculcating meekness and non-resistance must be harmonized with that other large class of utterances which call for "strife," "agonizing" to enter into the narrow gate, "confessing" him before men, finding "foes" within one's own household, and "holding on" unto the end. Though his advent was attended by the acclaim of "peace on earth" and in departing he is reported in the Fourth Gospel as saying, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you," yet he said, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword." He repeatedly bade men to "deny themselves;" he also spoke of the prodigal son as at length returning to the father's house when "he came to himself," indicating that while there is a self to be denied, there is also a self which should be heeded and obeyed.

Both the acts and the precepts of Jesus fail of significance for us unless we discern the principles of which they are more or less complete expressions. Indeed it is because the disciples of Christ, often unconsciously, have discovered the spirit of Jesus, more than the

external forms and phrases of his life, that the Christian religion has become a world-religion. Many men who undertook to do precisely that which Jesus did and to practice only the things which he enjoined, have made a miserable failure of their discipleship. The attempt to turn the dial of the ages back to the first century mars and nullifies progress. The Christian centuries have been rendered unchristian by inquisitions and bitterness, warfare, bigotry, and bloodshed, because, without discerning the universal and eternal principles in which Jesus wrought and taught, men saw only what he did and heard only what he said, fragmentarily, a part at a time, without due respect unto the circumstances and conditions and the modifications which were enjoined by other circumstances and conditions in the very acts and words of the Master himself. Did we do precisely what Jesus did, then would we need to become Jews, as Jesus was, and observe the Mosaic ritual, as he did. Verily there is a "letter" which killeth and a "spirit" which maketh alive!

Jesus did not lay down rules. He refused to select out of more than seven hundred rabbinical prescriptions that one which was greatest and best; he would not be a divider of rights and equities amongst men. In no sense was he a casuist. One might well say that he was not a teacher of ethics, for he did not construct an ethical system, or, if he did, the system has not been preserved for us. He uttered and exemplified ethical principles in abundance; but to give ethical principles out of which an ethical system can be constructed is very different from furnishing the system itself. Strictly speaking there is then no ethics of Jesus.

The more prominent principles of ethical conduct, to be deduced from both the example and the teaching of Jesus, include the following:

1. The principle of *consecutiveness* is prominent. He himself came not to destroy, but to fulfil, the religious principles which had been unfolding in the past. He was not iconoclastic; his method was constructive. He inculcated natural, orderly progress—"first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear." This is the evolutionary process. This method requires the exercise of patience toward immaturity and imperfection; it forbids censoriousness in judging: it expresses itself in gentleness and tenderness toward the

weak, the tempted, and the erring. Jesus insisted upon perfection as the goal, but he welcomed on the way those who sinned against both the ideal and the process.

2. Jesus regarded the character of a life as consisting not in the sum-total of acts but in the *motives* behind those acts. To him the heart was the source of life: hands and feet might even be dispensed with; anger contained the unexpressed elements of murder; lust, contemplated, lacked nothing but the occasion. Yet motives alone, even right motives, were not sufficient to meet his approval; motives must reach expression through their appropriate acts; he did not teach the passive life. Light and salt, unemployed, lost distinctiveness and merit; talents, unused, vanished; men would eventually be judged, not by reason of their well-wishing merely, but because their well-wishing had been transmuted by the alchemy of endeavor into life.

3. It was in this sense that Jesus asked for *reality*. The simplicity of childhood pleased him. He most severely condemned pretense and hypocrisy; he insisted upon sincerity. Fasting, seen of men, had no value; praying on the street corners was an offense. He made it plain that the inner recesses of the heart must at length be open to the light and hidden secrets be proclaimed abroad.

4. Jesus laid stress on the *Invisible*. Men are not alone; they need not worry; they are subjects of an Infinite Care; they may be trustful, hopeful; before them are treasures which cannot be taken away; they must serve him only, who is invisible.

5. Jesus reproved selfishness and inculcated *altruism*, the law of love. He taught that the man who sought his own welfare, even though gaining the whole world, would lose all advantage and profit; that selfishness is self-destructive. Riches, honors, powers, and comforts must all be tested by the law of service to others. Ministry is the ethical goal set forth by Jesus, and whatever ministers to the highest welfare of man he justified, while anything which impairs the highest welfare of man he condemned. The home, the neighborhood, the civil government, strangers and foreigners, religious institutions and religious services must be interpreted and must be protected with a view to increasing and preserving their usefulness to man. Man is the greatest object of the Divine Care and must be the

chief object of human solicitude. Outgoing love, whatever the concrete form of its expression, is ethically Christian.

When an investigator has examined with care the teaching of Jesus, searching for the fundamental, underlying principles, however he then may phrase them, whether as few or many, he will at any rate be forced to acknowledge that Jesus did not teach men primarily the rules of life; he was not a reformer; it is almost out of place to speak of "the social problem" in connection with Jesus, or to refer to "socialism" as in any way sanctioned by him. He dealt so little with conduct and social organizations and ethical acts, whether of the individual or of society, that these modern terms and modern conceptions seem inappropriate. He was a prophet, speaking for God; he gave men religion, not ethics. His religion was not theological, but germinant, and his ethics was but germinant in the great principles of his religion. Out of the germs may grow the systems of theology and ethics, and in the growth, developing from universal principles, will be found the perennial vitality and power of the Christian system for faith and conduct.